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ABSTRACT

Getting students to react to literature and write more than a good "topic" sentence is a perennial dilemma for teachers. A course at the Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury College, Vermont, that incorporated improvisation with the writing process used role playing to solve real life situations, physical and verbal warm-up exercises to prepare for writing topics and assignments, and, (in nonverbal improvised scenes) setting, character and storyline were shown to the class or audience through physical interaction and movement. Through improvisation, students were lured into the process of learning and assimilated knowledge of people and social situations through actual experiences. A teacher who participated in that course used improvisation in his English class of 34 ninth graders. After an orientation period, they used the strategy once or twice a week before writing or writing group sessions. An offshoot of this activity was a radio play. Each of five writing groups used the plot of Edgar Allan Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" and developed different scripts for radio complete with sound effects. Later, after workshops were conducted on improvisation and writing to enthusiastic response, the school administration accepted a course proposal for the next year called "Improvisation, Acting, and Writing," which grew to four sections serving over 90 students and which still continues. The use of improvisation in the classroom demands that students learn to communicate clearly. Improvisation contributes to the communication skills students desperately need and adds meaning to literature. (NKA)

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"Acting out" in the classroom: improvisation in the curriculum

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

by Joe Echle

Tracy is furiously taking notes. Bill stares at me intently, taking notes on everything. Rich is searching through his anthology for appropriate quotes. An active classroom? Yes. A class in the midst of a discussion on Poe's "Cask of Amontillado"? No. Tracy's notes are to Kara and Stacey about her weekend. Bill's stares are the glassy-eyed stares of disinterest. His mind is not on Poe but on the beach. Rich is looking through his book, not for quotes, but for captions someone before him has placed under the illustrations.

How do we get students to move from the teacher-dominated "class discussion" to a student-motivated discussion of character development, conflict, motive and theme? How can our students experience situations in which characters find themselves and react realistically? What do we do to bring about honesty and depth in focused essays and narratives? For years, I beat my head against the blackboard trying to get my students to react to literature and write more than a "good" topic sentence.

During the summer of 1985, studying with Carol Elliott MacVey and Ken Macrorie at Bread Loaf, I participated in a course that incorporated improvisation with the writing process. We worked together solving problems of real life situations through role playing. We "got into the heads" of characters by taking on their points of view in conflicts. We prepared for writing topics and assignments through physical and verbal warm-up exercises. In nonverbal improvised scenes, we were asked to show the class or audience our setting, character, and story line through our physical interaction and movement. These early scenes only lasted a minute or two, but we found they could serve as a nucleus for a piece of writing. The captain and crew of a space shuttle might be preparing for flight, or a series of downs in a football game might take place. Later, we added words to unscripted scenes. With dialogue added to previously nonverbal scenes, the characters involved were able to give the audience more information as they worked through a situation. The captain of the shuttle might find out there is a fuel leak, and he and the crew must find a way to solve the problem together in order to survive.

In short, through improvisation we were lured into enjoying the process of learning and assimilated knowledge of people and social situations through actual experiences. I felt that improvisational techniques might be an exciting vehicle to involve students personally in the lives of literary characters and also serve as a springboard for possible writing material.

Although the use of improvisation and drama had been successfully used in British schools by Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, and many others for over thirty years, I wondered whether I was doing the "right" thing. Improv worked with a class of twelve adults; it'll never be possible with a class of thirty-four freshmen. They'll get out of hand; they'll think it's all play. They won't learn what's to be covered in the course description. On the other hand, what would happen if drama and improvisation techniques did work? What would the results of writing groups be after they worked together with improvisation? Would they work together as a unit? What insights into literature would they develop? Would students begin to dig deeper for meaning in literature as well as in their own writing? What would be the positive application of improvisation in the curriculum?

Because of restricted time and building use, I picked at random an English class of thirty-four ninth graders. With this plan, I would have one ninth grade class working with the improvisation approach, while my other ninth and eighth grade classes worked through the traditional approach to the English curriculum. The improvisation group came to the class with varied backgrounds and experiences from two island districts and three mainland districts of the South Jersey shore and Pine Barren areas. They came from different backgrounds, but almost all arrived in the classroom with the same passive attitude toward learning: "You talk. We sit, listen, and report. We learn." I had so many questions about how improvisation could turn students from passive to active learners, and only these thirty-four teenagers could answer them for me.

Carol MacVey gave us the philosophy of YES. Saying *yes* may seem simple or silly to some, but many students negate so much in life or are negated by others that they often face brick walls before they attempt something new in a subject. Saying *no* gives both the student and teacher a chance to hide from potential failure or avoid risk and therefore growth. With a *yes* both student and teacher agree to risk and grow together in mutually supportive roles. Once you say *yes*, you can move on. Say *no*, and you can go no further. I really didn't know how this simple philosophy was going to change my life in the classroom, but I would risk it and find out. With this thought in mind, I walked into my classroom the first day of school. I asked my students to

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say yes no matter what they thought at first to things I would ask them to do. They were going to incorporate something called improvisation into literature and writing activities and I asked them to trust me and say yes. My students that year did say yes that first day of school and continued to say yes for the rest of the year. Some of those same students continued to say yes for three additional years as they continued in courses in Improvisation and Writing and Advanced Improvisation and Writing they asked for and helped create. Today, six years later, the YES philosophy is my opening day lecture.

The first week of school served as a short orientation period beginning with simple energy exchanges much like "follow the leader" games played as children: Do whatever the person in the middle of the circle is doing. These were followed by mirroring exercises where we paired off and one partner slowly mirrored the movement of the other. (For the mirror technique, a pair of students face each other and focus on each other's eyes. One partner assumes the lead and the other one copies—mirrors—the movements slowly, with no verbal communication. Throughout the exercise, by an unspoken understanding, the lead can shift back and forth between partners.) The main purpose of these exercises was to heighten focus and concentration on a specific object, the partner's movement, but later served as a relaxation and meditative technique prior to writing activities. We concluded sessions with focused journal entries where students recorded their reactions to activities. At first, the kids saw improv as play. There didn't seem to be any connection between improv and the "real work" of the English class, but my students said yes, and we moved on.

We got to our literature and formal writing, using improvisation once or twice a week before writing or writing group sessions. The kids relaxed with one another and were starting to work as a cohesive community. Tracy wrote in her journal: "I really feel comfortable with my group—it (mirroring) clears my mind and makes me forget everything except eye contact with another person. I'm learning more about myself and others." Jacqui reacted to having members in the writing group interpret another's writing orally in this way: "I liked Tim's writing piece! It was pretty funny. When Jackie read my story, I just cleared my mind and listened to her read. It was almost like reliving the scene. I felt like I was right on the beach again."

On a writing survey taken the first day of school, most students reacted negatively to the following statements: "I can help others write better." and "I show my writing to others in the class." By the end of the year, most felt they could help each other, and no one stated that he or she was afraid to share writing. My own journal entry of November 27 states that "There has been a build-up of sharing before the group. There are still a few shy ones, but even improvisation is not going to entirely change a personality trait." By year's end, those shy one of November were also sharing. The YES was working.

As the year progressed, I began to see how improvisation could be used in other ways in the English curriculum. We delved deeper into literature and writing through improvisation. When my students had a rough time with Poe's "Cask of Amontillado," I found myself saying, "Let's work this out with improv." Assigning volunteers the roles of Fortunato and Montresor, we brought the story to life. As I side coached, Montresor lured Fortunato to his home, led him through the dark passageways to the wine cellar, and walled up his victim. As the rest of the class watched, they came to understand what was going on and what might have been going on in the minds of the two characters.

An offshoot of this activity was the radio play. Each of five writing groups played with Poe's plot and developed scripts for radio complete with sound effects. We taped each group's play and shared them with the class and my other ninth grade class which had not been using improvisation. They shared pride and enthusiasm as they gathered sound effects and divided jobs so all in the group would participate. Later in the year, I would use improvisation techniques or spontaneous role playing to help develop court scenes to follow up Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* where George was placed on trial for Lenny's murder; "What could have been" mother-daughter talks and father-son talks in *Romeo and Juliet*; and Joe and Biddy venting their "true" feelings to Pip in *Great Expectations*. Each improvised scene was followed by the writing of a script character sketch or reaction paper based on the piece of literature combined with ideas originated with the improvised piece. Through this process, students were permitted to say yes to their own ideas about characters, plots, and conflicts developed in the lifelike re-enactments of improvisation. Students began to look at a situation in literature from different vantage points and solve problems from different viewpoints gained form role

playing. As Atticus Finch tells Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, to really know a person, "you will have to get into his skin and walk around in it for awhile."

We continued to use improvisation for the rest of the year. With each use, the class became more relaxed and creative with techniques. The improvisations we used in our classroom gained public recognition later in the year when we were asked to demonstrate improvisational techniques to the general opening of the district's Young Authors' Conference. I also conducted two workshops on improvisation and writing. The administration was so enthusiastic with the results of the class that they accepted a proposal for a course for the next year called Improvisation, Acting and Writing, which grew to four sections serving over ninety students. (The course continues in its sixth year with eighty-seven students for the 1990-91 school year.)

With literature and writing, the enthusiasm and success of the class continued. As a final project, Cheryl Anne and Jackie developed a video tape using classmates improvising the song "Nothing" from *A Chorus Line*, introducing it with Shakespeare's "Advice to Actors" from *Hamlet*. Eddie and Thad introduced their slide show on friendship with original poems, and Eddie later wrote on his process piece: "Thad and I picked friends because we began to think our friends are the most important resource we have.... We also picked this because we see English class as probably the closest class of all. We became that way through improv, mirroring, and the sharing of literature. It showed us many things about our friends we'd probably never know. Our class has much respect for each other, and I thought this would make our class realize how much friends mean to them."

It was during the writing of short stories that I hit upon something else. There was evidence that the students had begun to internalize improvisation as a pre-writing method. When we used volunteers to improvise scenes and characters from proposed story plots, the class reacted positively. In response to the fact that we couldn't improvise for all thirty-four students in the class, Carolyn wrote in her journal: "Partners were the best and the group gave me some direction. The improv made the characters become real. I think more improv is needed to help everybody because it gave good ideas to those who were able to see their characters." In my observation, I found the writing pieces from this class to be better developed and more honest than those of the other similar ninth grade class.

Looking back on the year, I had no idea what would happen when I said yes or how my students would react if they did. We met with nothing but positive reaction from administrators, teachers, and parents. The class created two literary newsletters during the first two marking periods and contributed heavily to the school's award winning literature magazine, *Star Gazer*, during the second two marking periods.

I found a community grew out of the improvisational techniques. Students trusted each other with writing in pairs, groups, and class. Improvisation spilled over into literature which made it come alive and exciting for the class and me. The honesty and depth displayed in their writing were shared in the literary publications they helped develop.

The use of improvisation to heighten awareness in writing and the study of literature changed my whole approach to teaching and my students' involvement in learning. As Viola Spolin says in *Improvisation for the Theatre*, "A teacher of wide past experience may know a hundred ways to solve a particular problem, and a student may turn up with the hundred and first."

Although my original intent was to see how improvisational techniques could be used as a pre-writing activity, I found its use creeping more and more into other areas of my English curriculum in all my classes. The intense concentration demanded of the kids in the improvisational exercises began to spill over into writing. Students began to play with language and see relationships between literature and their own lives. Through playing with a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, Kristen was freed to personalize what she felt about a particular line. The result was a poem about the sea. At this point, she did not relate the line to action of the play, but my intent here was to produce a piece of creative writing, and later she was able to contribute to a discussion of relationships in the plot.

The use of improvisation in the classroom demands that students learn to communicate clearly. Students are freed to use movement as well as voice to get a point across. They are required to show as well as tell and do it in such a way that they, as well as the class, understand clearly. Too often drama and improv are seen as areas that belong in the realm of theater and the school play. However, they do deserve a place in the classroom where teacher and students can "live through" real life situations and become solvers of real problems. Improvisation

contributes to the communication skills students desperately need and adds meaning to literature with which they become involved. My doubts of September subsided, and I became more involved with my students in saying yes and moving on.❑

EPILOGUE:

As mentioned, this first experiment with improvisation turned into full elective courses in Improvisation and Writing (grades 10-12) at the request of these first students. It has attracted over eighty students per year for six years and has to its credit:

—Twenty student-written one-act children's plays performed for thousands of first and second graders over five years.

—Performance of a student-written one-act play which became a finalist script in the NJ Young Playwrights Festival.

—Winner of most original, most creative and best play for an original play at a regional drama festival.

—Presentations of student-written monologues and scenes at our district's Young Writers at Southern Conference.

—Workshops on using improvisation for teachers and administrators throughout the state (and the Northeast).

—Much student pride on what they have accomplished.

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